DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 410 564 CS 215 877

AUTHOR Matsuda, Paul Kei
TITLE Developing Praxis through Critical Reflections in the ESL Writing Classroom.
PUB DATE 1997-03-13
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English (Second Language); Higher Education; *Journal Writing; *Theory Practice Relationship; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS Collaborative Inquiry; Composition Theory; Critical Writing; *Praxis; *Reflective Writing; Teacher Development; Teaching Perspectives; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

When four writing instructors were given the opportunity to teach writing for second language learners, they decided to collaborate in some ways and chose journal sharing as a way of facilitating their collaboration. The original goal of journal sharing was to critically reflect on their teaching practices and to connect their knowledge of composition theory and English as a second language (ESL) theory in their own particular instructional context. They tried to develop praxis--or situated theory grounded in practice--through collaborative critical reflections. Journals have long been recognized as useful for teacher development, but this project differed significantly from projects reported in other studies in the following ways: the project was self-initiated; all journal entries were shared; the mentor did not read the journals; journals were exchanged through e-mail; and journals were analyzed collectively. Although the most important motivational force was the desire to grow as teachers of ESL writing, other intrinsic motivations were the sharing of ideas and resources; telling stories; and developing research ideas. Extrinsic motivations were peer pressure; conference presentations; and possible publication opportunities. (Contains 3 figures and 13 references.) (NKA)

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ED 410 564

Developing Praxis through Critical Reflections in the ESL Writing Classroom

Conference on College Composition and Communication, Phoenix, AZ. 13 March 1997.

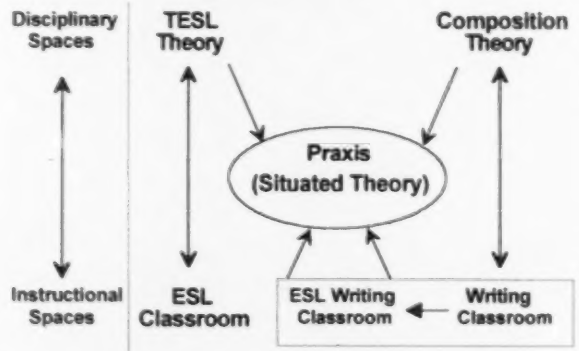
by Paul Kei Matsuda

Purdue University

Abstract. *This paper discusses the use of critical reflection journals as a way of developing praxis, or situated theory, and as a tool for educating as well as empowering new ESL writing teachers.*

When the four of us -- Joe Wenig, Aya Matsuda, Jill Harney and Paul Matsuda -- were given the opportunity to teach ESL writing and to be mentored by Professor Tony Silva in the fall of 1996, we decided to collaborate in some ways, and we chose journal sharing as a way of facilitating our collaboration. The original goal of journal sharing was to critically reflect on our own teaching practices and to connect our knowledge of composition theory and ESL theory in our own instructional context. That is, we tried to develop praxis -- or situated theory grounded in practice -- through collaborative critical reflections (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Praxis in ESLWriting Classroom



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Journals in Teacher Education

Journals have been recognized as a useful tool for teacher development as well as for evaluation by many ESL teacher educators. Richards (1990) recommended the use of journals as a way of facilitating critical reflection. Many teachers have used "dialogue journals" to monitor new teachers' progress and to provide formative responses (Bailey, 1990; Brinton, Holten, & Goodwin, 1993; Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman, & Conrad, 1990; Thornbury, 1991). Some researchers also analyzed journal entries to gain insights into the process of teacher development and to evaluate teacher education programs (Brinton & Holten, 1989; Murphy-O'Dwyer, 1985; Numrich, 1996).

Limitations of Journals

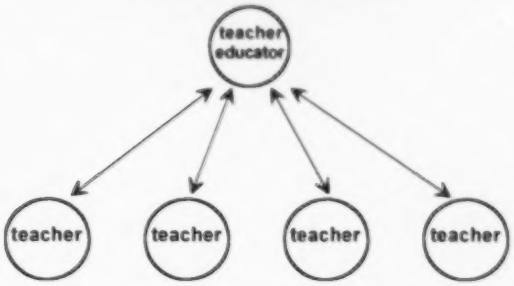
Although responses to the use of journals in teacher education have been mostly positive and enthusiastic, there are some limitations as well.

Lack of motivation. The lack of motivation among teachers is one of the potential problems in the use of dialogue journals. This is an important consideration especially when the journal is imposed by the teacher educator because, as Barkhuizen (1995) points out, teachers may perceive the purpose of the journal differently or even become suspicious of the intent of the teacher educator.

Appropriation. The presence of the authority figure, however unthreatening, may influence how writers perceive and write the journal (see Jarvis, 1992). The effect is all the more serious when the journals are required or evaluated by the teacher educator. The teacher educators' use of journals as data for their own research may also raise ethical questions (Barkhuizen, 1995).

Individual reflection. The use of journals have often been limited to the "dialogue" between the teacher educator and each teacher (Figure 2). While this model serves an important purpose, it privileges the view of the teacher educator as the knower and may promote competition at the expense of cooperation. As a result, unique perspectives that new teachers bring to the group may remain untapped.

Figure 2. Individualistic View of Teacher Development



Although, as Barkhuizen (1995) noted, the usefulness of journals are often overestimated, the limitations are not "insurmountable" (p. 33). What follows is an account of how we overcame these limitations.

Our Reflection Journals

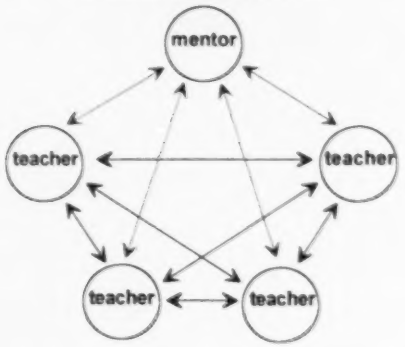
Our project differed significantly from projects reported in other studies in a number of ways:

1. The project was self-initiated. Perhaps this was the most significant reason for the success of our journal sharing. We took initiative in conceiving and implementing the project.

We received much encouragement and support from our mentor, but the project itself was neither required nor evaluated.

2. All journal entries were shared. This defining feature of our project transformed the nature of the journal itself. We used the journal not only for personal reflections but also for sharing of ideas and stories. In this collaborative model of teacher education (Figure 3), we were able to develop a body of local knowledge, or what North (1987) called "practitioner's lore" (p. 23; see also Harkin, 1991).

Figure 3. Collaborative View of Teacher Development



3. The mentor did not read the journals. To prevent the possibility of appropriation, our mentor voluntarily refrained from reading the journals. This probably allowed the four of us to express our views and discuss concerns without the fear of being judged, although there is no way of finding out its true effect.

4. Journals were exchanged through e-mail. Although the accessibility sometimes became a problem -- especially when we tried to log-on from off-campus -- the use of e-mail facilitated the preservation of "significant or important events for the purpose of later reflection"

(Richards, 1990). It also made our journals more interactive, because we were able to respond to each other more frequently.

5. We analyzed our own journals collectively. Today's presentation is one of the results. The ongoing and retrospective analyses helped us critically reflect on our evolving praxis. In the process we also negotiated what to discuss and how to respond to each other in our journals.

What Kept Us Going

Although we were all excited about this project, keeping the journal regularly was still difficult for most of us. There were, however, some motivational forces that kept us going. Some of the intrinsic motivations included:

- sharing of ideas and resources;
- telling stories; and
- developing research ideas.

There were some extrinsic motivations as well:

- peer pressure;
- conference presentations (e.g., Harney, Matsuda, Matsuda, & Wenig, 1996); and
- possible publication opportunities.

The most important motivational forces of all, however, was our desire to grow as teachers of ESL writing, which, after all, was the goal of our project.

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